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# The Food Stamp Program's Elderly Nutrition Pilot Demonstration

## Final Evaluation Design

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### Abstract

Low participation rates in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) by poor elderly individuals have been a persistent problem. Historically, no more than one-third of eligible elderly have participated in the FSP—a participation rate far lower than that of any other major demographic group. To address the low participation rates among the elderly, USDA is funding the Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations—six separate pilot programs that are testing three alternative ways to increase elderly participation in the FSP. This report discusses the logistical considerations for evaluating the impacts of the six demonstrations. It presents an overview of the evaluation design, discusses alternative approaches for data collection, presents a schedule for the evaluation, and presents the expected costs of the evaluation.



Food Assistance  
and Nutrition  
Research Program

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Low participation rates in the Food Stamp Program (FSP) by poor elderly individuals have been a persistent problem. Historically, no more than one-third of eligible elderly individuals have participated in the FSP—a participation rate that is far lower than that of any other major demographic group. To address the low participation rates among the elderly, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is funding the Elderly Nutrition Demonstrations—six separate pilot programs that are testing three alternative ways to increase elderly participation in the FSP and improve the satisfaction of elderly persons who participate. Insights and information obtained from the evaluation of these demonstrations should help federal policymakers formulate effective strategies for increasing FSP participation among the elderly.

Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) was selected through a competitive bidding process to design the evaluation of the Elderly Nutrition Demonstration pilots, prepare a schedule for the evaluation, and estimate the cost of conducting the evaluation. The evaluation design is presented in Sing et al. (2002). This final report presents evaluation design options, schedules, and cost estimates for the evaluation.

### **THREE DEMONSTRATION MODELS TO INCREASE THE ELDERLY'S FSP PARTICIPATION RATES**

During the summer of 2001, the USDA entered into two-year cooperative agreements with six states to implement three demonstration models. Florida is implementing the simplified eligibility model, which is designed to reduce the burden associated with applying for food stamps by simplifying the process of determining eligibility. Arizona, Maine, and Michigan are implementing the application assistance model, which is intended to increase eligible elderly individuals' understanding of the program and assist elderly individuals with the application process. Connecticut and North Carolina are implementing the alternative food stamp commodities model which provides food stamp benefits as commodities rather than either coupons or as payments on an EBT card.<sup>1</sup>

Florida and Maine began serving clients under the demonstration in February 2002. If the demonstrations end in September 2003, Florida and Maine will have served clients for 20 months. North Carolina anticipates that it will start to serve clients sometime during the spring of 2002. Arizona hopes to start in June 2002, but acknowledges that this is an optimistic estimate. Michigan anticipates starting in June 2002, and Connecticut anticipates starting in October 2002.

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<sup>1</sup>The pilot in Arizona is replacing a pilot in Oregon which asked to withdraw from the demonstration.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE EVALUATION DESIGN**

There are six research objectives for the evaluation:

1. Assess the effects of the demonstrations on elderly FSP participation
2. Assess the effects of the demonstrations on the average value of the FSP benefit that elderly households receive
3. Assess the effects of the demonstrations on client satisfaction with various aspects of the FSP
4. Quantify the federal, state, and local costs of the demonstrations
5. Assess the effects of the demonstrations on state and local FSP agencies, nonprofit organizations participating in the demonstrations, alternative food assistance providers, and other stakeholders
6. Describe the implementation of the demonstrations, problems encountered, solutions to these problems, and lessons learned.

The evaluation design includes both an impact analysis and a process analysis of each site's demonstration. The impact analysis will evaluate the effects of the demonstrations on FSP participation, average benefit levels, client satisfaction, and ongoing administrative costs of the demonstrations. The impact analysis will use a pre-post comparison group design. Administrative data and a survey or focus groups with demonstration participants will provide key information to support the analyses. The process analysis will quantify the costs of the demonstration, identify the effects of the demonstrations on stakeholders, and describe the implementation process. Data for the process analysis will be from discussions with demonstration staff and stakeholders, cost worksheets completed by demonstration staff, and the Quarterly Reports submitted by the demonstrations. The evaluation objectives, data sources, methodologies and evaluation design issues are summarized in Table 1.

## **EVALUATION DESIGN OPTIONS AND ESTIMATED COSTS**

There are two key design options that have a major bearing on the costs of the evaluation. They are:

- Whether the demonstration grant period is two years (ending in September 2003) or is extended for all or part of a third, option year (ending in September 2004)
- Whether client satisfaction will be assessed with a survey at the commodity alternative sites or with focus group discussions at all sites

Currently, the two-year demonstration grant period ends in September 2003. However, it is very likely that the USDA will seek to negotiate an extension with each of the demonstrations to provide more time for the demonstrations to operate. If a third year is added, the demonstrations could operate until September 2004.



TABLE 1  
OVERVIEW OF EVALUATION OBJECTIVES, DATA SOURCES,  
AND EVALUATION DESIGN ISSUES

Evaluation Objective	Data Sources	Methodology	Evaluation Design Issues
(1) Assess effects on FSP participation	Quarterly FSP participation data obtained for sites from states, beginning 7 months before start of demonstration	Descriptive analysis of data from pre/post comparison group analysis	Identifying appropriate comparison sites
		Conduct sensitivity analysis	Acquiring data
		Use findings from process analysis	Determining whether change in participation occurred at demonstration site  Determining extent to which change in participation (if any) was due to demonstration or other factors
(2) Assess effects on level of food stamp benefits	Quarterly participation data obtained for sites from states, beginning 7 months before the start of the demonstration	Descriptive analysis of data on benefit value and federal costs from pre/post comparison group analysis	Determining whether change in average benefits occurred at demonstration site
	Grocery store price scan data		Measuring value of commodities
(3) Assess effects on client satisfaction	Survey of elderly clients in commodity alternative sites who apply/recertify for food stamps	Univariate and multivariate regression analysis of survey data	Assessing the reliability and validity of satisfaction measures
	or Focus groups with clients at each site	Qualitative analysis of focus group data	
(4) Quantify costs of the demonstrations	Quarterly reports	Descriptive comparisons	Compiling uniform and accurate cost measures across sites
	Discussions with stakeholders	Process analysis	
	Participation data	“Building-up” cost estimates	Measuring cost of volunteers

TABLE 1 (*continued*)

Evaluation Objective	Data Sources	Methodology	Evaluation Design Issues
(5) Assess effects on stakeholders	Quarterly telephone discussions with key demonstration staff	Process analysis	Triangulating the findings by speaking with all relevant stakeholders
	Annual site visits		Developing ways to encourage and secure participation of key informants
	Quarterly reports		Identifying the correct people to speak with in each organization
(6) Describe implementation process	Discussions with stakeholders	Process analysis	Identifying the correct people to speak with in each organization
	Site visit		
	Quarterly reports		

USDA may extend the two-year demonstration grant period by awarding additional funds to each site, or by negotiating a no-cost extension to the current two-year grant period (for sites that have not spent all of their grant funds). The latter should be sufficient to allow the demonstrations to serve clients for two years.

Due to evaluation resource constraints, the Economic Research Service (ERS) and the Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) will decide whether to assess client satisfaction with a client satisfaction survey at the commodity alternative sites or with focus groups conducted at all sites. If a client satisfaction survey is conducted, we recommend that the evaluators attempt to interview all households in the target population in North Carolina, and a sample of the target population in Connecticut.

We estimate that the evaluation will cost approximately \$1,200,000 to \$1,300,000 if the demonstrations end in September 2003 and a survey is conducted in the commodity alternative sites to assess client satisfaction. If focus groups are conducted at all sites to assess client satisfaction, we estimate that the evaluation will cost approximately \$1,000,000 to \$1,100,000. If the demonstrations end on September 2004, we estimate that the evaluation will cost an additional \$550,000 to \$620,000 if a survey is conducted and \$330,000 to \$360,000 if focus groups are conducted to assess client satisfaction. These cost estimates were developed for 13 separate evaluation activities by estimating the costs during the baseline period (during which the demonstrations operate through September 2003), Option A (during which each demonstration serves clients for two years), and Option B (during which the demonstrations operate through September 2004) (Tables 2 and 3).

It is important to keep in mind that our cost estimates rely on a number of assumptions that are described in this report and that draw from MPR's experience conducting similar evaluations. During the evaluation, unanticipated circumstances or additional information about the demonstrations (such as the actual size of their survey target populations) will likely require revising the cost estimates presented here.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

We have one primary recommendation pertaining to the evaluation. We recommend that the USDA provide funding for the demonstrations to operate until September 2004 or beyond. It often takes interventions such as demonstrations several years to yield any detectable impacts. Consequently, the demonstrations are more likely to yield measurable impacts on FSP participation and client satisfaction if they operate for an additional year. Another year of operation will also provide the evaluators with more data to evaluate. This is particularly important for the evaluation of client satisfaction. Because Office of Management and Budget (OMB) approval is required for the client satisfaction survey, the survey data collection will not begin until June 2003 or later—depending on when OMB approval is obtained. If survey data collection begins in June 2003 and the demonstrations end in September 2003, the evaluators will be able to collect data on client satisfaction for only three quarters. If OMB approval takes more than three months, the evaluators will be able to collect data on client satisfaction for only two quarters.

TABLE 2

APPROXIMATE COSTS OF EVALUATING THE ELDERLY NUTRITION DEMONSTRATIONS:  
OPTION WITH CLIENT SATISFACTION SURVEY AT COMMODITY SITES—NO FOCUS GROUPS  
(In Dollars)

Study Task	Baseline Budget <sup>a</sup>	Additional Costs Option A <sup>b</sup>	Additional Costs Option B <sup>c</sup>
Analysis of participation and benefits	\$140,000 - \$160,000	\$40,000 - \$50,00	\$45,000 - \$55,000
Two interim memoranda—analysis of FSP participation and benefits	\$25,000 - \$30,000	0	0
Survey Design (instrumentation, programming, sample design, and sample frame)	110,000 - 130,000	6,000 - 8,000	6,000 - 8,000
OMB submission	40,000 - 60,000	0	0
Survey data collection	150,000 - 160,000	185,000 - 205,000	190,000 - 210,000
Survey data processing, weighting, and analysis	90,000 - 100,000	30,000 - 40,000	30,000 - 40,000
Conduct and analyze focus groups	0	0	0
Quantify costs	120,000 - 140,000	3,000 - 5,000	3,000 - 5,000
Process analysis	310,000 - 340,000	130,000 - 140,000	180,000 - 200,000
Interim Report	N/A	75,000 - 85,000	75,000 - 85,000
Final Report	100,000 - 110,000	See baseline budget	See baseline budget
Orientation meeting, design memorandum, and final briefing	45,000 - 55,000	See baseline budget	See baseline budget
Project management	25,000 - 35,000	15,000 - 25,000	15,000 - 25,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,200,000 - \$1,300,000</b>	<b>\$500,000 - \$550,000</b>	<b>\$550,000 - \$620,000</b>

NOTE: The assumptions used to compute these cost estimates, such as survey sample sizes, are described in this report.

<sup>a</sup>Demonstrations end in September 2003

<sup>b</sup>Demonstrations end after serving clients for two years (February 2004 through September 2004, depending upon the site).

<sup>c</sup>Demonstrations end in September 2004

TABLE 3

APPROXIMATE COSTS OF EVALUATING THE ELDERLY NUTRITION DEMONSTRATIONS:  
OPTION WITH CLIENT SATISFACTION FOCUS GROUPS—NO SURVEY  
(In Dollars)

Study Task	Baseline Budget <sup>a</sup>	Additional Costs Option A <sup>b</sup>	Additional Costs Option B <sup>c</sup>
Analysis of participation and benefits	\$140,000 - \$160,000	\$40,00 - \$50,00	\$45,000 - \$55,000
Two interim memoranda—analysis of FSP participation and benefits	25,000 - 30,000	0	0
Survey Design (instrumentation, programming, sample design, and sample frame)	0	0	0
OMB submission	40,000 - 60,000	0	0
Survey data collection	0	0	0
Survey data processing, weighting, and analysis	0	0	0
Conduct and analyze focus groups	190,000 - 210,000	0	0
Quantify costs	120,000 - 140,000	3,000 - 5,000	3,000 - 5,000
Process analysis	310,000 - 340,000	130,000 - 140,000	180,000 - 200,000
Interim Report	N/A	75,000 - 85,000	75,000 - 85,000
Final Report	100,000 - 110,000	See baseline budget	See baseline budget
Orientation meeting, design memorandum, and final briefing	45,000 - 55,000	See baseline budget	See baseline budget
Project management	25,000 - 35,000	15,000 - 25,000	15,000 - 25,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$1,000,000 - \$1,100,000</b>	<b>\$270,000 - \$300,000</b>	<b>\$330,000 - \$360,000</b>

NOTE: The assumptions used to compute these cost estimates are described in this report.

<sup>a</sup>Demonstrations end in September 2003.

<sup>b</sup>Demonstrations end after serving clients for two years (February 2004 through September 2004, depending upon the site).

<sup>c</sup>Demonstrations end in September 2004.